POSTCARDS FROM MALTA
Image, Consumption, Context

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Abstract: This paper examines the contexts and complexity of consumption of Maltese postcard images at the meta-level. The paper draws on theoretical perspectives on the nature of photography as a system of representation and its associated social function and applies it to the theory and analysis of tourist desire and motivation. Analysis within this framework suggests that while certain stereotypical images of Malta as an exoticized “sun and sea” destination are sustained, imagery has diversified as tourists attempt to penetrate “backstage realities”. The co-existence of these images points to the increasingly sophisticated and complex motivations of contemporary tourism and to more complex representational structures and strategies that raise particular and general ethical issues. Keywords: imagery, postcards, consumption, context, Malta.

INTRODUCTION

The picture postcard, alongside the photograph, is the most widely disseminated tourist icon. It serves both as a personal memento of the experience and as a means of extending it to other potential tourists as recipients. The aim of this paper is to examine the role of modern postcards as symbols that sustain notions of the “exoticism” and “authenticity” of destinations. Primarily, the paper explores what this might reveal about the consumption of postcard images at the meta-level, rather than their production or individual consumption (although certain significant linkages among the three are drawn out). More specifically, the paper focuses on the contexts in which such consump-
tion occurs and is shaped, relating here to the particular case of tourism development in Malta.

Malta is a well-established destination having grown from a very small base in the 60s following a drive to economic diversification after independence from Britain. Its tourism industry expanded rapidly in the 70s as a result of the growth of inexpensive package holidays. The majority of tourists originated in the United Kingdom, although increasingly, more are being drawn to Malta from wider areas of northern Europe. In part, this trend also reflects the efforts of the Maltese government to diversify this market and to expand into special interest and cultural tourism (Markwick 1999).

These historical and geographical specificities of the evolution of Malta’s tourism mark it out as a particular case. The long and close linkage with the United Kingdom, as a colony, and, later, as an important destination for British tourists, has played a significant part in shaping the tourism product and experience, including the expression of the latter through the postcard. The tourist symbol, of course, has a long history within Europe (Heinandez-Sampilayo 1974). Notably, particular pictorial forms were closely associated with the development of the traditional British seaside resort and its promotion (Ward and Gold 1994:1–7). Moreover, photographic technology associated with postcard production advanced rapidly throughout the period of, but particularly at the inception of, resort development in Malta—although the postcard considerably predated Malta’s tourism development, having first been popularized by the British armed forces in colonial times (Bonello and Smeed 1985; Bonello 1992a, 1992b; Said 1989).

Unsurprisingly, modern postcards in Malta have evolved into a wide variety of types with a range of traditional and new images drawing on a variety of universal and particular themes. The present study unpacks symbolic meanings through an exploration of these themes and is based on more than 500 modern postcards randomly collected on field-visits to Malta over the past three years. Though the sample is obviously very small in terms of overall production, nonetheless, it is representative of some broad themes in imagery which readily emerge. In addition, it is representative of the range of modern postcards produced, as opposed to merely imported for sale, in Malta. An interview with the largest distributor of printed material in Malta confirmed that the majority of cards retailed were entirely produced within Malta, with work rarely being “put-out” to foreign photographers and then predominantly by one publisher. The largest of the five Maltese postcard publishers currently has 40% of the market, and only a small percentage of readily identifiable postcards originate from Italy, Ireland, and France. Therefore, to this extent, the sample can be described as “culture-specific”.

Although postcards have a relatively long shelf-life, low profits, and competitiveness mean that the 300 retail outlets for postcards in Malta constantly require new image productions through the distributors. According to Malta’s leading postcard distributor, precisely which images sell most is “serendipity”, but the market is “essentially demand-
led” (interview with Malcolm Miller, Miller Distributions in 1998). This means that, while the postcards sampled here can be regarded as “home produced” or “self representational” of Malta and Maltese culture, postcard imagery can be expected to reflect trends in the segmentation of the market which are largely responsive to external consumer demands. At a purely pragmatic level, individual consumers may demand affordable postcards, with images that are suitable for different purposes (such as a maiden-aunt to receive), or are appealing to the purchaser for a range of idiosyncratic reasons. This would not explain, of course, why there are distinct genres of postcard images, some of which are in greater demand than others (personal communication with Malcolm Miller in 1998). Rather, such broad patterns of postcard image consumption point to the operation at a deeper, even unconscious level, of a shared or similarly grounded consumption of culture. Thus, while it may be argued that buying and sending a postcard is a straightforward matter (and so too with postcard imagery), this simplistic stance leaves the representations and complex cultural construction of meanings, as “unexamined”.

This paper is therefore chiefly concerned with generalizing on the consumption of postcard images as symbols of touristic experience (although less abstract issues of individual consumption of images are touched upon where this is linked to contestation of meanings, sometimes leading to the appropriation of new images). The focus here is particularly on the contexts within which consumption occurs and is shaped; that is, it relates specifically to the historical linkages between Malta as a destination and the countries from which tourists originate, and the social formations and dominant discourses associated with this relationship. In this, consideration is necessarily given to the interplay of consumption and production in terms of the extent to which the control of production and self representation in modern Maltese postcards is influenced by the demands and expectations of tourists.

IMAGERY, POSTCARDS AND PHOTOGRAPHIC SIGNIFICATION

Largely in response to wider concerns with representations and especially those expressed in visual “texts”, tourism imagery has begun to receive increasing attention in recent research (Mellinger 1994; Selwyn 1996). In particular, Dann (1988, 1996a, 1996b) offers an extensive discussion of this imagery including reference to the extent to which images can control and determine the behavior of tourists as well as a wide discussion of their motivation. Such research points towards the importance of understanding the links between motives and experiences and the visual representations of those experiences.

However, researchers have rarely focused specifically on tourist postcards (but see studies of “ethnographic subjects” by Alber and James 1988; Edwards 1992b, 1996) to explore how the nature of their photographic images symbolize desired experiences and how they sustain particular motivations.

The power of the photograph in depicting images on picture postcards is considerable. As Sontag (1979) and Edwards (1992a) note, it
can make the invisible visible, the unnoticed noticed; the complex simple, and the simple complex. This power enables the photograph to signify or convey messages to the viewer, doing so through a number of the characteristics which it possesses. Being a still picture as opposed to a motion picture, the photograph freezes the image in space and time forever. The photograph can also decontextualize that which is depicted by transposing it to other contexts. Photography thus fragments space and time. These fragments come to stand for the whole or the essence of things, often in representations which may extend, symbolically, far beyond that which is photographed. In other words, these become metaphors or symbolic structures which reify culturally formed images as observed realities (Edwards 1996:200). Furthermore, in the aforementioned process of the symbol becoming reality, the signifier and signified are collapsed into one another. However, these are not fixed but rather are arbitrary and free-floating so that the meanings of the images can be “appropriated into the viewer’s cultural discourse” (Edwards 1996:200).

Since the viewer is able to gaze without challenge, the photograph becomes an objectified subject. Appudurai (1986:53–4) suggests that, in this, the photograph takes on the characteristics of a “fetish” (see also Metz 1991), both in the literal, value-laden sense and in the Marxist sense of hiding the social relations of its production. It is the interplay of such relationships, values, and meanings in the contexts of consumption and production which forms the nub of the cultural construction of imagery—both generally and more specifically in photographic images.

Paradoxically though, it is the photograph per se which ties images to the real world in that it is a tangible thing, the material evidence of that which is photographed. The image is beguiling in this respect, of course, since it would seem to be a true representation of the physical world—etched, as it is, into chemicals by the light reflected from the photographed object. Therefore, there is a substantive relationship between the photograph and its referent allowing one to believe in the reality of the photograph. But in so doing, it also denies the mediation or interpretation by the photographer (Jackson 1992). In other words, the photograph appears to be believable as a direct representation of reality, a “true” reflection of actual places, people, and events. These images thus “authenticate”, so that the act of taking a photograph or buying a picture postcard on holiday effectively serves to represent and signal the genuineness of the touristic experience (Sontag 1979:9).

Theories of Tourism

The semiotic framework in which postcard imagery operates is more clearly articulated if it is linked to a number of interrelated theories of tourism. These relate to the motivating structures in the touristic process and, although their exaggerated standpoint and totalizing explanations have been variously subject to recent critique and adjustment (Bruner 1991; Nash 1984), their basic arguments remain influ-
ential (Edwards 1996:200; Selwyn 1992:136–7). They thus have an important contribution to make to the analysis of modern tourist postcards.

In order to examine the full range of modern Maltese postcards, this study builds on Edward’s (1996) approach, drawing on a wider range of tourism theories, from Gray (1970) to more recent extensions of the theories of MacCannell (1976) and Graburn (1978). According to Gray (1970), tourism motivations can be grouped into the two categories of “sunlust” and “wanderlust”. The former centers on “the body” and is defined as “a type of travel which depends on the existence elsewhere of better amenities for a specific purpose than are available in the domicile; it is prominent with particular activities such as sports and literally, the search for the sun” (1970:93). This type of motivation is most often associated with the sun and sea holiday package typical of the mass tourism which developed in Malta during the 70s. In more contemporary times (and terms), however, this motivation may be more appropriately reconceptualized as the ever more extensive and intensive search for the exoticism of “the pleasure periphery” (rather than merely a search for better amenities and climate elsewhere). Thus, while Malta remains heavily reliant on sun and sea holidays, increasingly, it has had to compete to represent itself in terms of other types of tourism.

By contrast, “wanderlust” (despite its early manifestation in the European Grand Tours) is most often associated with the development of niche marketing of special interest tourism, such as that associated with the diversification Malta’s tourism industry. An increasingly important dimension of Malta’s competitiveness, in fact, is its representation in terms of its potential for tourism related to the country’s rich cultural heritage. “Wanderlust” is centered on “the mind” and is defined as “the desire to exchange the known for the unknown, to leave things familiar and to go and see different places, people and cultures or relics of the past in places famous for monuments and associations or for their current fashions and contributions to society” (Gray 1970:93–4). However, the definition of wanderlust has been elaborated in more recent years. Implicit within it is the notion of the tourist quest; this notion is extended and refined further by two other interrelated theories of tourism: MacCannell’s (1976) analysis of the quest for the authentic in tourism and Graburn’s (1978) hypothesis that tourism constitutes a “ritual” or “sacred journey” of transformation for the tourist.

MacCannell claims that the tourist quest is the quest for the authentic. This desire, he argues, arose from the alienation of modern society and the need to retrieve the authentic (Selwyn 1996 for a discussion of this term and its relationship to myth and reality). Graburn argues that tourism is a “ritual” or “sacred journey” of transformation in which the tourist “self” is transformed through knowledge gained by contact with the “nonordinary” and the tourist host as “Other”. In this sense, the postcard is a relic or souvenir from another world—a fragment of the experience recaptured in perpetuity—which can serve as a focus for narratives of the experience. Moreover, in sending the postcard home, the experience of the nonordinary and the Other is
validated; it is disseminated to viewers, while simultaneously marking the status gained by the sender through the touristic experience (Stewart 1984:138).

Therefore, the picture postcard is “a multi-faceted icon of the tourist experience” as eloquently expressed by Edwards, who goes on to suggest that the photographic picture enhances this. The fragmentation of time and space in photography, she argues, is “mirrored by the tourist experience in which fragments are incorporated into a unified experience which, from beginning to end revolves around images” (Edwards 1996:201). This imagery is thus particularly significant among the images found in a range of travel literature used to project the attractions of particular destinations. In examining projected images of Malta, modern postcards are by no means insignificant ephemera; rather, their images can be meaningfully related back to the central motivating structures of the tourism process. Nor are postcard images undifferentiated cultural effusions. Rather, the images in the sample postcards from Malta examined in this study, in fact, readily fall into distinct groups of symbolic images or motifs which can be related to the set of theories discussed above. The sampling used in this study differs from that used in the few other analyses of modern postcards. These analyses were confined to the study of postcard imagery of “ethnographic” subjects (Albers and James 1988; Edwards 1996). Furthermore, they were based on horizontal sampling from diverse sources, whereas the present study is a culture-specific analysis which entails vertical sampling. Although a complete range of modern Maltese postcards is used, it is nonetheless possible to identify “historical layering” which in fact relates to the motifs or groups of symbolic images referred to in the foregoing section. This is because modern postcards for sale in Malta aim to appeal to a wide range of tourists, some of whom (58% in 1996) have been primarily motivated to visit the destination for a traditional seaside holiday while others (32% in 1996) visit primarily because of the recently growing desire to visit heritage sites or engage with other cultures and so on (Markwick 1999; National Tourist Organization Malta (NTOM) 1996).

Postcard images thus relate to particular motivations and desires that are associated with the social formations and associated ideological discourses that dominated in a specific historical context. Earlier images tend to persist, even though they may be reworked alongside those which have emerged at a later date. Examples of postcards which illustrate the typical features of each motif or group of symbolic images can thus purposefully selected for analysis and these are considered in relation to motivating structures in a broadly chronological order of development.

Sunlust or the Search for the Exotic

The early stages of Malta’s tourism development between the mid-60s and the early-80s were typified by mass tourism. Motivated primarily by sunlust, mass tourism development was based on sun and sea holidays. In many ways, such motivations were shaped by historical cir-
cumstances and geographical relationships between Malta, as a destination, and the United Kingdom and other north European countries, as places of origin. Unsurprisingly, the image of Malta as the “Blackpool in the sun”, a seaside resort “with a side order of history” (Boissevain 1996:19) was one of the earliest to emerge in modern postcard imagery. This consisted of a number of different elements or motifs that drew selectively on images similar to those of the traditional British seaside resort. Significantly, these elements, (although by no means exclusive to this particular genre of postcards) are often collectively represented as a montage consisting of multiple images within grids on a single postcard (Figure 1). The grid is a quintessentially touristic feature, acting as a frame, as an encompassing view, and which is reminiscent of another closely associated form of ordering experience: that of the photograph album. By juxtaposing images on the postcard, meaning can be built up from fragmented space. Such arrangements present a metaphor of touristic experience—representing the fragmented as unified (Edwards 1992a). The figure is typical in that it presents the modern and the leisured within the multi-layered history of a Mediterranean environment. A number of images that play on the sun, sea, and sightseeing theme are thus enmeshed together, including place symbols such as seaside and scenic coastal views, and sun and fun images associated with the body.

Images of the former have been one of the more enduring themes of Maltese picture postcards. Places of stay and coastal views (whether of resorts or scenic coasts) remain the most popular among Maltese images, according to distribution agents’ surveys (personal communication with Malcolm Miller in 1998). The popularity of such place images undoubtedly owes much to the tourists’ desire to validate the
experience of places visited (I was there: it was there) through the postcard, whether purchased as a personal memento or to disseminate to others by sending a postcard home. In particular, these postcard images symbolize the difference of places visited to the tourist’s ordinary home area and routine environments. Difference is often simply presented in terms of color and light. In most Maltese postcards, there is a strong depiction of primary colors and brightness: blues, yellows, reds and, surprisingly (in view of the pale honeys of Malta’s built and natural environment), even greens, are typically overstated. This representation evokes the Romantic view of the Mediterranean, its climate and environment, centered on blue seas, bright skies and sandy beaches, which acts as a foil to the climatic and emotional greys and depressions of northern Europe (Selwyn 1995:4). Such oppositions are thus important components in the construction of difference. At the same time, the desire for the familiar was undoubtedly one of the motivating factors which drew the first mass tourists from the United Kingdom to Malta (Lockhart, 1996; Lockhart and Ashton 1991; Markwick 1999). Though familiar images, such as red pillar boxes, Bedford buses, and fish and chip shops have been more common in brochures (Black 1996:113–114), that were designed to tempt the psychocentric tourist to foreign shores, perversely, their occasional incorporation in postcard imagery may be used to actively point up difference.

Postcard imagery has also been focused on the body. Images of the body are most typically embedded within coastal scenes depicting leisure pursuits associated with the sun and fun of mass tourism activities in Malta. Such imagery draws heavily on the popularly supposed oppositions of work and leisure. Thus, references in postcard captions to Malta as an island, particularly in conjunction with the term “paradise” are perhaps not so much purely descriptive as a code suggestive of an escape from the mundane to the idyllic freedoms of “elsewhere”. The binary opposition between work and leisure is also played out in the imagery focused on relatively passive forms of leisure such as sunbathing. Visual imagery and captions on postcards thus represent Malta, for instance, as “The Island of Sunshine and History”, while depictions of sunbathers suggest that one of the historical reasons for the development of resorts was their health giving propensities (Selwyn 1995:4).

Images of the body in postcards may often contain explicit or implicit reference to the erotic. Such imagery became popular in postcards sold in British seaside resorts particularly during the interwar years, when the cartoon form of postcards was used as a device to exploit the sexualized themes about the body, including the humorous, the bizarre, and the grotesque. These images have their origin in the traditional association of the seaside resort with inversions of conventional behavior (including the relaxation of sexual mores) and the seaside resort as the archetype of “places on the margin” (Shields 1991). As a universal and continuing theme, depictions of the body as well as sexual innuendo are to be found among the postcards available in retail outlets in Malta. However, their numbers are relatively low as are the numbers of retailing outlets selling them, such as to demand explanation. This may in part be due to the continuation of certain
sexual taboos associated with the traditionally strict Roman Catholicism of Malta. At the same time, within Europe more generally, the impact of feminism and the move against images which degrade women’s bodies is also likely to have been influential. Given these limitations on postcard depictions of the theme, two exceptions are worthy of closer examination for the meanings conveyed and the power relations that underpin them.

The first exception concerns recent imports of 14 different postcards depicting images of sexualized bodies, such as semi-naked torsos and topless bathers with the captions “Bumming around in Malta”, “Breast Greetings from Malta”. While the intended message is that the experience of Malta is of “Great Holidays ... Get the Picture!”, the reaction of Maltese to such imported messages is evidently often hostile. For instance, topless sunbathing has frequently been a contentious issue in Malta’s press (Belizzi 1992). Particularly within Maltese language newspapers, such postcard depictions have been condemned as semi-pornographic materials contravening the terms of import regulations under the Regolamenti ta’ l-1975 dwar il-Pornografija u l-Oxxienta (Bonnello 1997). However, undoubtedly indicating the power of consumer demand, examples of such explicit postcards were still available in certain retail outlets within Malta in Spring 1998.

The second exception is far more subtle in conveying meaning, to the extent in fact that the implicit sexual reference could initially be disregarded. On one level, these Maltese postcards depict serious photographic studies of the archaeological heritage of Malta’s prehistoric past. Certainly, this would appear to be the original intent in presenting these postcard images for sale. As photographic subjects the abundant forms of the Sleeping Goddess and the Venus of Malta are presented using high quality printing and pseudo-scientific captions which provide an authority and authenticity enhancing aura. For example, the Venus is described in archaeological and technical terms, together with the caption that “This headless body in naturalistic terracotta represents the nude body of a woman. The modeling of the body is beautiful, proof of the amazing artistic abilities of the people of those times”. However, the imagery is capable of fracture and can be appropriated by consumers to provide alternative meanings. Thus, on another level, the imagery offers possibilities which play on the theme of the erotic and the grotesque and is strongly reminiscent of the fat woman of the interwar saucy British postcard. The similarities cannot be dismissed as mere visual correspondence, particularly given the relative popularity of the Venus among other possible icons of Malta’s prehistory (such as the Temples at Tarxien) which are less commonly depicted in postcard images offered for sale. Rather, the parallels suggest a similarly grounded consumption of culture and the articulation of continuing cultural fascinations through time. In the same way, postcard depictions of the Sleeping Goddess in the pose of classic reference to the sexualized body provides a device through which the gaze is legitimised and persuades the viewer that this is knowledge and understanding, not merely the voyeurism which photography offers. However, it may be the erotic potential of the latter which individual con-
sumers appropriate to serve as a humorous memento of “the Blackpool in the sun”.

The cultural association of sea, sun, and sex and the tourism of modernity has been considerably weakened, however, in the 80s and 90s amid recently growing international concerns about skin cancer and HIV (Fsadni and Selwyn 1996) These, and other international trends, such as the rise of tertiary education and of the new middle-class (Munt 1994; Schuster 1993), and the demographic aging of Northern Europe (Davies 1995), as well as competition from more distant destinations, have all been significant elements in Malta’s maturing tourist market. As a result of these trends, although sun and sea tourism remains important for Malta, new policies have encouraged the development of new forms of special interest tourism within the islands (Boissevain 1996; Markwick 1999). In particular, the growth of cultural tourism which was the primary motivation for 19% of Malta’s tourists in 1993 and almost one-third in 1996, has been actively encouraged (NTOM 1993, 1996). These developments both reflect and are reflected in a new set of images responsive to the new social formations and the associated dominant ideological discourse.

**Wanderlust or the Search for the Authentic**

Reflecting the recent growth in cultural tourism, one of the most widely represented among modern Maltese postcard images depicts material expressions of Maltese culture. In examining these, it is important to distinguish between overt stereotypes (such as those depicting traditional folk dances being performed by dancers wearing questionable versions of Maltese costumes) and those claiming to accurately represent or to communicate behavior or experience that has cultural relevance to the subject. Though the former might appear to be worthy of most attention, since, as stereotypes they so clearly defy “reality”, the latter are the main focus here, precisely because they operate at a more subtle and insidious level. That is, at the denotative level, the imagery which the latter depicts may be said to be real or to have some veracity. As such, they may be more revealing than overt stereotypes of the structures and power relations that underpin the production and consumption of images that are taken to be authentic.

Many Maltese postcards depicting images which appeal to the tourists’ desire for “real” or “authentic” experiences of Maltese culture are almost invariably associated with the past. Thus, old ways of life such as fishing, goat-herding, or lacemaking, and older forms of transportation used on the islands such as luzzus, karrotzin, or even vintage Bedford buses, and so forth, figure significantly among the postcard images of Maltese culture (Figure 2). Either individually or collectively, such images or motifs stand as cultural markers of authenticity. All these markers operate in a timeless vacuum, however, as is indicated by the discourse of tradition which is embedded in the captions typically accompanying such images. Thus, the visual suggestion of the past is reinforced by the embalming nature of such captions as “Scenes of passive tranquillity still found in many rural areas of the Maltese
Islands” or “A Gozitan goat-herd leads her goats home. Scenes such as these can still be seen on the unspoilt island of Gozo”.

Such picture postcards and their captions conjure up a timeless vision of Maltese culture (often also expressed in other travel literature) by collapsing the past and the present into one. Tradition is a dominant theme reiterated in many postcards of vernacular subjects. For example, one caption notes “A typical Maltese scene of an old woman at her spinning wheel. A common sight days gone by, today one of Malta’s dying traditions”. Another reads “Traditions of old—selling capers and preparing fishing nets for the next catch”. In postcards in which images of modern life intrude, it is clearly a deliberate intent on the part of the photographer to exploit multiple meanings. For instance, in one postcard captioned “Cleaned up for the next match—football tops drying on a traditional balcony”. The juxtaposed elements in the close photographic framing and the incongruity of signifiers effectively serves to highlight the past against the modern and to underline the continuity of the past into the present. Although this postcard imagery is informed in part by a desire for “pastness”, ironically, the nature of the photograph is something atemporal: unfixed, outside time, actually denying historical past. The past which is drawn upon in such postcard imagery is not a historical past but rather one which stands in opposition to now and is nostalgically defined as somehow better. As such, it expresses the contemporary desire or nostalgic longing for a personal wholeness and freedom which is perceived as lost (Frow 1991:135). In many ways, this nostalgically defined past is the antithesis of postmodern lifestyles in northern Europe. Hence the appeal of traditional peasant cultures within industrialized societies, such cultures being perceived as rooted not
only in the past, but rooted in the soil, subsumed in nature, an extension of another natural world (O’Connor 1993). Such Otherness and difference are pervasive themes of Maltese postcards depicting traditional Maltese culture.

The past is an important reference point in representations used to suggest authenticity in such postcards. Other reference points serving as markers of authenticity are also found embedded in postcard depictions that draw on images of nature and the natural, or of simpler folk societies and communities. Whether expressed pictorially or as captions on postcards, once again, these themes are played out around a series of oppositions to suggest difference: the natural as opposed to the built, the simple as opposed to the complex, the harmonious as opposed to the fractured. Thus, harmony is a common theme, whether within nature or in traditional local communities or in the wider context of global relationships. Local people are frequently depicted engaged in traditional tasks, such as lacemaking or mending fishing nets. Thereby, their work is romanticized by being collapsed into nature, suggestive of a lifestyle that is somehow closer to nature. Similarly, local people are often portrayed in village or other community settings that are evocative of harmonious relationships. The smiling and welcoming faces of “friendly, happy locals”, for instance, are a common component of postcard imagery. Other postcards depict family groups apparently toiling cheerfully alongside one another, or show women proffering local produce or elderly men gazing pensively into the distance, perhaps reflecting on the old times.

While such imagery denotes difference, contrasting with the lifestyles of the tourists, the images simultaneously suggest a familiarity, a sense of belonging by drawing on the universalist vision of the global family of man. In this way, the imagery defuses some of the anxieties of touristic encounters with the Other and the unfamiliar, while at the same time serving to point up difference. Rather than transcending difference, as Edwards observes, “what appears to transcend the different in fact depends upon it for its very definition. Fascination (or desire) is itself couched in contradictions: so similar yet so different, so near yet so far” (1996:215).

In such ways, a series of markers serves to express authenticity and thus desirability. These markers are not necessarily exclusive to Maltese postcards, however. Cohen (1989), for instance, has shown how “unspoilt”, “primitive”, and “remote” are used almost universally as markers of desirability. However, despite the universality of such markers, in the case of Malta, there are specificities which shape the precise ways in which, for instance, nature and the natural are depicted. While traditional culture is romanticized by being collapsed into nature, images of nature per se, particularly of fauna and flora, are notable by their absence from contemporary Maltese postcards. In fact, despite the diverse and unique natural environment possessed by this destination, only one such postcard (depicting a montage of native wild flowers) was located in searches in Malta during the period in which postcards were being collected. Although the invisibility of nature in postcard imagery may initially strike one as mere omission or simply
reflective of being outside the experience, there is an important difference in cultural response to nature between tourist and host here. As Borg (1998) has shown, there is a conflict between the traditional and rural Maltese perception of nature as something to be overcome for rural people to make a living and the modern environmentalist and conservationist attitudes that emanate mainly from Malta’s urban areas and northern Europe. For instance, Malta’s garigue karstland is still classified as wasteland and although ecologists point out that such habitats support Malta’s highest biodiversity, up until 1992, farmers were being encouraged to reclaim such wasteland for agriculture (Borg 1998:117). In view of the difference in these perceptions of nature, the representation of Malta’s natural environment in imagery to tourists who come chiefly from northern Europe is clearly generally difficult. More particularly, given the continuing widespread importance of bird trapping and hunting in contemporary Maltese culture (Fenech 1992), there are rarely images of bird life in modern postcards.

The invisibility and visibility of the particular themes or motifs in Maltese postcard imagery is similarly apparent in the imagery in government-produced Maltese brochures (Markwick forthcoming). This intertextuality forms part of a set of mutually sustaining relationships. Thus, the postcard images of the “authentically different” not only draw on touristic expectations but they also help to reinforce perceptions held of Malta, lending weight to the images seen beforehand in brochures as well as actual sights and experiences gained during visits to the islands. Moreover, production and consumption of images are also caught up in a mutually sustaining relationship. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that these images are not immutable; indeed, a chief consequence of the interplay of production and consumption is that new imagery may emerge as a result. Response to consumer demand appears to have been the dominant influence shaping the production of modernist images of Malta, rather than vice versa. However, although imagery is likely remain predominantly sensitive to change in consumer demand, a growing sensitivity to the ethics of representation in home-produced imagery would seem to be inevitable as contemporary trends in postmodern tourism encourage tourists to seek increasingly intimate experiences of Malta.

The Quotidian

While images of the different help to authenticate the experience, the quest for the authentic is considerably enhanced by experience of the quotidian. The quotidian relates to the commonplace, the everyday in the routine cultural practices of the host’s community. Quotidian imagery lends authenticity to the experience since picture postcards of the everyday convey a sense of intimacy of experience that appeals to the tourist’s desire for the authentic.

An example is found in a postcard entitled “Secrets from Nanna’s Hearth”, which has the caption “Nanna, the grandmother—true custodian of Malta’s kitchen”. Both the title and the caption suggest that the postcard provides the viewer with revelation and insights into Mal-
ta’s gastronomy and customary practices, and roles within the Maltese family and home. The visual imagery echoes this suggestion, depicting the interior, private space of the home, the pleasant intimacy of the grandmother’s smile and the showing of an abundance of food produce and wine. In presenting some of the intimate homely features of daily life, such picture postcards serve as “traces of the authentic” (Edwards 1996:210). Thus, these help to confirm and validate elements and fragments of Maltese culture often briefly and superficially glimpsed or fleetingly grasped en passant by the tourist. As such, they also satisfy expectations, confirming that which actually precedes the tourist actual experience of them (Frow 1991:124–5).

Ultimately of course, as Crick (1989:331) has pointed out, since the tourist is not part of the social intimacy and moral fabric of the host’s community, the experience of the authentic is vicarious. It is being experienced only in the imagination. Nonetheless, the picture postcard conveys the suggestion of experience as well as knowledge and understanding, in two ways. First, since symbolic value and the social environment of commodity acquisition are integrally linked (Appudurai 1986:15), the purchase of such a picture postcard in the local cultural milieu in which it was produced, significantly adds to its symbolic meaning and social value. Second, the nature of the photographic image provides a seeming direct contact with the desired object, a sense of immediacy, which as noted earlier, eclipses the mediation of the photographer.

The authenticating role of images may be explored further in relation to MacCannell’s model, which draws on Goffman’s (1959) notion of what have been described as frontstage and backstage experiences. The former experience is constructed and viewed as mere performance or appearance, while the backstage moves the tourist behind the scenes. The growth of the popularity of postcard images which penetrate behind the scenes is readily apparent in those recently published in Malta. This development has particular significance in the context of Malta. Given the introverted character of much vernacular architecture, cultural traces are often concealed within private spaces or, in other cases, are effectively invisible to the uninformed eye. Thus, for instance, a series of postcards appropriately entitled “Hidden Charms” recently appeared for sale in Malta. Examples which are typical of the genre include postcards depicting intriguing details of traditional Maltese village houses, such as zigzag holes adjacent to the door that permit a cat to enter without enabling outsiders to peer inside (Figure 3) or plant stands which, when filled, indicate the presence of a marriageable daughter in the household. Such postcards point-up and offer knowledge of traditional village life (even though such features may no longer have significance for contemporary Maltese lives).

Often, the captions accompanying these postcards employ the discourse of discovery, and both express and encourage of the growing desire of cultural tourists to explore behind the scene (to pursue authenticity into the backstage realities of touristic experience). For instance, in a similar manner, the “Hidden Treasures” series of post-
Figure 3. Hidden Charms, Images of Traditional Maltese Door with Cat’s Entrance

cards suggest an enticing glimpse of behind the scenes realities, awaiting discovery by the tourist. Thus, a postcard of the series depicting a junk shop, or “regetteria” (significantly, a term not in general use in Maltese) carries the caption “Though not a common sight nowadays, one still finds these [regetteria] in older and more traditional parts of the Maltese Islands. Delving into these, one might prove lucky in finding hidden treasure”.

Though less prevalent than other types of postcard imagery discussed earlier, such series of images have emerged as significant during the last two or three years. Reflecting a shift in notions of authenticity from front to backstage, these respond to the postmodern tourist’s desire to learn more about the culture of the Other expressed through an increasingly intense search for the authentic and authentically different experiences. Ironically, as Frow (1991:130) has observed, in the very act of recognition of its authenticity, the authentic becomes perceived as inauthentic—so that the authenticity is continually defined as Other, forever moving out of reach.

Postcards allow one to believe in the experience of a backstage reality, however. In much the same way that tourists’ photographs pro-
vide an authoritative “proof” of the accuracy of the experience, so too does the photographic image on the postcard. Such images confirm the “authenticity of response” and, as Taylor (1994) has suggested, protect the tourist from the anxiety of having failed to recognize the desired object. In this way, postcards suggest “reality”, since, as indicated earlier, photographs possess exceptional powers and “they may subvert reality becoming a substitute or even surrogate experience” (Edwards 1996:211).

Belief in the experience of a backstage reality helps to encourage the ever-more intensive searches for authenticity, and tourists increasingly and sometimes intrusively attempt to penetrate behind the scenes (see, for instance, Boissevain 1996, for a discussion of the impacts of intrusive cultural tourism on Malta’s Silent City of Mdina). Such intrusions raise important ethical issues on the rights of the Maltese to protect their own cultural identity and to avoid over-exposure of daily lives to the scrutiny of outside consumers.

Realism

The more complex representational structures and strategies in the postcards, as discussed above, point to the increasingly complex and sophisticated motivations and desires of postmodern tourism. A strong indication of the trend is found in the appearance within Malta during the last few years of a genre of postcards depicting what may be described as realist imagery. Interesting examples here are from the sepia-toned series of postcards, using photographs by Mark Mallia. Significantly, this series of postcards published by Karrarti (a firm which specializes in ostensibly realist imagery of Malta) is entitled “Maltese Characteristics”. One of the series (Figure 4) depicts an area of open wasteland on Manoel Island; an abandoned old Bedford bus and empty oil drums are framed by the ruins of the fort, while a stray dog looks back at the viewer from the foreground. The snapshot-like nature of the photograph and the eye-level camera angle heightens the naturalness and reality of the scene. Yet the image plays on a number of themes. Although appearing at first impression to reveal some of the realities of contemporary Maltese life, it deflects the viewer’s attention to the more endearing images of the dog and the familiar sight of the vintage bus typically used by tourists as public transport on the islands. In so doing, the imagery detracts from the contentious issues of political economy relating to the neglect and blight of particular sites on Malta which a deeper reading of the imagery might reveal.

Of course, exposure of the more contentious images of Maltese life forms the grist of local newspaper sales, and introspective views of their everyday life appear in socio-documentary photographic collections. As Fenech indicates, these images, such as his “Lemon Tea and Green Finches” taken in a tea bar favored by bird-trappers, are photographed “not from an omnipotent and detached stance but from an ‘inside the clan’ situation as an ‘insider’” (Fenech 1993:378). However, there is a sense in which such images generally remain “far from the tourist gaze”.

432 POSTCARDS
The distance implied here is perhaps best seen in a final example from the “Maltese Characteristics” series of postcards (Figure 5). Possibly deliberately, unlike other postcards in the series, this particular example lacks a title. Its black and white photographic image depicts a traditional arched shop-front typical of those still to be found on the edge of towns and in villages in Malta. Among the
objects hanging from the shop’s open shutters are a number of small cages used in the trapping of song birds. The black and white photography makes it impossible to judge whether or not this relates to the present. Moreover, the viewer’s eye is drawn to the foreground image of a small dark-haired boy, hand in pocket, leaving the shop with a bag of sweets. The imagery is again capable of fracture and the viewer is distracted from the complexities and contentious issues contained in the image. The small boy in the foreground attracts the viewer’s gaze, while the background and its significance are effectively rendered less visible.

Images of this type point up a paradox. To some extent, the “invisibility” of contemporary Maltese culture in postcard imagery suggests a growing responsiveness to the ethics of representation by image producers, given the increasing backstage intrusions by tourists as consumers of culture. Perversely, the traditional, almost stereotypical images protect lived experience from the gaze by satisfying tourists’ desires and expectations without exposing real lives. However, it is precisely this type of stereotypical imagery that continues to inform, and is informed by, unequal relations between the tourist and the host.

Herein lies a problem for those involved in the production of postcard imagery. Is it preferable to provide a postcard stereotype, or risk exposing the realities of contemporary Maltese culture for the scrutiny and judgement (or worse, perhaps the ultimately detached indifference) of the outside world? Dealing with this paradox is clearly difficult and it will be interesting to trace the future development of postcard imagery and to compare this with developments in the contexts of other destinations.

CONCLUSION

Adopting theoretical and cognitive approaches, this paper provides a framework that facilitates analysis of the complex range of modern Maltese postcard imagery. Analysis shows that postcard imagery relates meaningfully to desired touristic experiences and expectations. That is, these images symbolize particular desires and fantasies that are central to the motivating structures of the touristic process. Thus, far from being insignificant ephemera of tourism, postcard images play an integral role in sustaining the industry.

The case study shows that postcard imagery draws on a number of universal and specific themes that derive significance from Malta’s relationships with the north European countries of its guests. The geographical specificities of these relationships are frequently important in shaping Maltese postcard imagery, often also playing on historical associations such as the country’s long and close relationships with the United Kingdom. However, the representations and meanings contained within such images are not immutable and are evidently subject to challenge and change in the two respects. First, as this study indicates, the meaning communicated by any given image may be multi-layered and requires systematic unpacking to reveal and understand
the messages. Since postcard imagery is informed by dominant discourses and social formations, “reading” meaning in relation to these (within the context of Malta’s north European relationships here) is a key step in initial research. At the same time, since any image is capable of fracture, its meanings may be subject to contestation and/or appropriation. Within the space limitations of this paper, it was possible to indicate only a few of the instances of contested meaning in Maltese postcard imagery. Undoubtedly, however, these examples signal the potential for further detailed research on contested meanings of postcard images. Empirical studies, focused on individual tourists’ (or Maltese) responses to particular motifs, for instance, could offer one possible way forward to investigate the cultural construction of alternative meanings of postcard imagery.

Second, the representations used in postcard imagery may themselves be subject to change. Thus, sets of images or motifs can be related to trends in the evolution of Malta’s tourism that occur in response to consumer demand. To the extent that production is consumer-led, it is responsive to touristic desires and motivations. Certainly, in the initial stages of the growth of tourism in Malta, imagery appears to have been substantially shaped by the north European demand for sun and sea holidays. In turn, the production of Maltese postcard imagery has helped to perpetuate tourists’ notions of the exotic and the authentic. However, as the motivations and desires of tourists become increasingly complex and sophisticated and are drawn increasingly into backstage realities, consumers demand the production of images that expose more of the intimate and even contentious realities of local life. This raises interesting ethical issues, particularly since the representations produced in response to such demands are essentially home-produced. An interesting corollary to the consumer-driven focus of this study would be research on the processes of production and the extent to which the Maltese have or can have control of production and self representation.

This study has been exploratory in nature. It has set out to build on existing research, broadening the scope of analysis beyond that previously restricted to postcard imagery of ethnographic subjects, to encompass the full range of images in modern postcards. It has also identified a number of aspects for further research, as already noted, and signals the probable interrelationship of these aspects within complex circuits of consumption and production. In particular, however, this research has stressed the importance of the contexts within which such circuits operate. In focusing on the consumption of Maltese postcard imagery, the present study details the geographical and historical specificities involved in processes of negotiating meaning within a culture-specific context. While indicating processes which may prove common to European tourism to some extent, the analysis also indicates the importance of research that shows how such processes can vary in particular contexts. Therefore, the paper stands to stimulate not only further research into linked areas, but also comparative studies to investigate the processes of consumption and production of postcard imagery in a range of different contexts.
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